

The Impact of the 1918 Reform Act on the House of Commons

Martin Farr

Newcastle University

Abstract

The victorious conclusion of the war, coupled with a great democratising reform for the peace, created a sense of expectation that the parliament elected in December 1918 could not more starkly have disappointed. There was widespread shock at the overnight transformation of party politics, and general disorientation and speculation. To the central criticism that the 1918 Reform Act had produced a deeply unrepresentative and therefore undemocratic House of Commons, came complaints that the legislature had become merely an appendage of the executive, and parliamentary government had been supplanted by party government. Many opined that the authority of the House of Commons had been undermined. This article considers how the implications of the Act were envisaged, and how they were experienced and reported. It will look at the legislature that resulted, its members, and how they adapted to and changed its procedures and conventions. Finally it will reflect on the politics of the impact of the Reform Act, on the parties, on their policies, and on a new political environment that had been created. Through their writings at the time and their reflections subsequently, those who were Members, and those who were observers, of Parliament testified as to how they felt the House of Commons had changed as a result of the impact of the 1918 Reform Act.

Keywords

Representation of the People Act 1918

Parliament

MP

House of Commons

Conservative Party

Labour Party

Liberal Party

Speaker of the House of Commons

general elections

democracy

‘The magnitude of the measure is so obvious as to be almost platitudinous; its significance, though not less certain, is perhaps more subtle.’¹

I

‘We have to face this morning the spectacle of the old British political system in ruins’, one newspaper announced when finally the results, if not the consequences, of the General Election were known.² A great ‘reform parliament’ – not to mention a ‘victory parliament’ – could expect to be exalted by high purposes; none served with such disrepute as that which followed the 1918 Reform Act. ‘After the victory and the brief jubilations,’ a Member

remembered, ‘there followed a period of confusion and squalor which one might have expected only in defeat.’³ ‘It is mediocrity personified’, opined another editorial, a year later.⁴ It ‘was quite the wickedest I have known’, recalled one Member of Parliament who sat in ten; ‘Some called them the hard-faced men, I should have said empty-headed.’⁵ ‘It had not been difficult to get into’, another admitted, ‘provided one stood either as a Conservative or a National Liberal and there were many men there uninterested in politics but merely attracted by the kudos of being an M.P.’⁶ The preponderance of Conservatives and National Liberals meant the Commons ‘suffered principally from the lack of Parliamentary ability and authority in the ranks of the Opposition’; for the Free Liberals and for Labour, Asquith and Adamson were likened to Prospero and Caliban.⁷ Outside, pessimistic screeds proliferated: ‘[g]rave dissatisfaction with Parliamentary government is widely felt and expressed’, reflecting the ‘undoubted decline in the prestige of Parliament’.⁸ There was ‘popular inattention’, ‘disconsideration’, even a ‘growing contempt of institutions’.⁹ The Burke scholar Frank Raffety detected a ‘great decline in the influence of the House of Commons’.¹⁰ Hard it was perhaps that morning to recall during the ‘war parliament’ the recent triumph of peaceful progress, that ‘remarkable legislative achievement’, ‘the most comprehensive measure of electoral reform enacted’; one which ‘made the whole system of what we regarded as democratic representation seem rudimentary.’¹¹ The House of Commons elected in 1918 was certainly not what was anticipated from ‘the greatest revolution this country has seen’.¹² Unless by great revolutions was also meant great confusion.

It is actually a perfectly explicable irony that the impact of the Representation of the People Act 1918 on the place whence it came and where its consequences were first felt has yet to be studied. That one of Britain’s most significant democratising reforms transformed the principal legislative chamber of the country is obvious; demonstrating in quite what forms

that took is somewhat harder. Its impact being tied neither to a date nor to an issue, the evidence is almost all circumstantial; it is hard to disaggregate which aspects of what came after were direct consequences of the Act, rather than the consequences of the consequences of the Act. Although it created the world that found expression in the Commons, the Act itself is metaphorically almost what it was literally: a backdrop, as if democracy were a *mise-en-scène* courtesy of the Office of Works and Public Buildings. Once the Act had passed its third reading on 7 December 1917, there was scarcely a mention of it – as distinct from its effect on the general election known to be impending – in newspapers, in campaign material or in the private papers and memoirs of Members, candidates and parliamentary officials; all were similarly silent. Significantly, the Act never acquired a moniker. Whereas that of 1832 was soon thereafter invariably known as the Great Reform Act, the 1867 Act generally called the Second Reform Act and that of 1884 usually dubbed the Third, the 1918 Act was rarely called the Fourth Reform Act, and almost never by its full name. Various it was the Franchise Act, Reform Act, or Electoral Reform Act. Other measures – pre-eminently the Parliament Act 1911 – lived longer in renown. After an initial fanfare of superlatives, more usually it was not mentioned at all.

Other than for those inside it, at the time the doings of the Commons were a preoccupation only of journalists and political scientists, for whom the Act prompted a series of stock takings and summary reports of varying degrees of portentousness. For subsequent scholarship, it was a subject overlooked rather than neglected. The Act is significant because it sits at the fulcrum of broader historiographical debates about parties (demographic change, the consequences of the war), the results of the 1918 election, and the precise, perhaps exaggerated, role of the Act in creating a new electoral environment.¹³ Few historians have been concerned with its immediate impact; in the procedural over the political, and challenges to politicians and to party were more vital subjects than whatever changes there

may have been in or to the Commons itself. Once the Parliament was elected, the parties sought to adapt to the new system. The Commons itself was almost taken for granted. Retrospective studies have tended to be *longue durée*, or to deem other issues to be more prominent, or to identify changes the impacts of which were more discernible.¹⁴ The 1918 Parliament as such proved to be not especially privileged; centennial interest began to rectify that.¹⁵ Aspects that might still profitably be considered include the Act and its implications, as envisaged and experienced; the assembly it produced, its conventions, and the character and status of its members; the politics of impact, in terms of parties and their policies, and the meaning of the House of Commons after the 1918 Reform Act.

II

Even had it wanted to, the House of Commons was not to resume from where it had left off in August 1914. Preliminary to a new, and likely post-war, Parliament, Speaker Lowther had chaired an inquiry – the first Speaker’s Conference – into electoral reform, the report of which he advised the Prime Minister to make public.¹⁶ From its recommendations, Members went on to show, Sir William Bull told them, ‘characteristic British phlegm when, in the midst of a great war, we deliberately decided to have a Reform Bill’.¹⁷ Two major anomalies had survived the previous one: the continuation of plural voting, and the denial of votes for women. The Conference reached broad agreement on universal male suffrage, voter registration, plural voting, university representation, redistribution of seats, adoption of alternative vote for single member constituencies, and even the enfranchisement of women who had attained a specific age.¹⁸ The subsequent Bill embodied those recommendations, leaving proportional representation and votes for women to a free vote: to expedite its progress, electoral reform was decoupled from that of franchise; PR was lost, for Labour ‘the

one serious blot in what is otherwise a most comprehensive Franchise Reform'.¹⁹ While political scientists recognised the form as being of much broader modern constitutionalism, what was bullishly exceptionalist was that though the Act bore great fidelity to the report it represented no consistent body of principles; it was a progressive more than a radical measure, as was noted at the time.²⁰

There was general agreement that the Act would mean profound change, though little consensus as to what that change would be.²¹ The Act was recognised as being more than merely a piece of franchise legislation; upon the basis of a doubled electorate 'it erects an electoral system which is almost entirely new.'²² A 'greater Reform Act than any that have gone before it' had been passed 'without more than a ripple of excitement, dealing with questions which in pre-war days would have aroused bitterest feelings'.²³ The Act repealed in whole or in part over one hundred statutes, changed the conduct of elections, and transformed the character and size of the electorate, tidying up the 'chaotic concretion' of other acts and measures to extend the franchise.²⁴ The most significant outcome of the Act was the redistributing, rationalising, and equalising of constituencies ('a sort of jigsaw puzzle', thought the Speaker, 'though rather more interesting'²⁵). The electorate was now so large that the state made it its business to ensure that qualified people were registered. The prospect of an election determined by 'slavish adherence' to the report struck 'terror in the soul of the party agent' standing 'on the brink of the unknown.'²⁶ In addition to commentarial surveys, guides to the perfecting of the new electoral machinery rapidly materialised.²⁷ With election expenditure now having to go through the agent, electioneering interest groups were cauterized; through the requirement of a £150 deposit the Act introduced a restriction – a capital requirement – on standing for election rare in democracies.²⁸ The new legal maxima on expenses benefitted the coming party, Labour, although the result of the election ensured that the benefit was initially well-disguised.²⁹ With the Conservatives, the socialists went on

to defend the system by which they would be over represented; the attractions of electoral reform waned for Labour as they waxed for the Liberals, who in 1922 belatedly included it in their manifesto. The Conservatives had been fearful more of the electoral consequences – the effect of the uncouth and the un-male – than of the institutional ones. As it was, not all the new male voters were working class, and only older women were enfranchised.

Redistribution proved a boon as the areas of growth were where Tories were stronger, and the Act still retained the plural franchise in the form of university Members and business votes. With the self-denying absence of the 73 Irish Sinn Fein MPs, to Conservatives the new democracy could appear more propitious than the old.

When it came, as one candidate recalled, the ‘outstanding feature of the 1918 election was apathy’.³⁰ With voting on a single day, the election created a national campaign, albeit one where activity was compromised by shortages of paper and petrol, and the outcome by questions of legitimacy. Only half of voters voted, and ‘a *bare quarter of the electorate*’, to the disgust of one newspaper, voted for the government. Turnout was 58.9 per cent, by far the lowest of any twentieth century election. ‘Not only is Parliament unrepresentative, but the people who have got themselves returned to power expressly “wangled” the electorate so that Parliament *should* be unrepresentative’.³¹ There was much in the contest ‘which redoubled little to the credit of “democracy”’, a coalition Conservative, admitted. ‘Our victory proved to be too complete.’³² The snap election had been ‘a plan for the extinction of all independent opinion,’ for another editorial; ‘there is serious danger that we shall discover too late that the credit of Parliament has suffered a disastrous blow’.³³ To one Labour man who lost his seat, and who risked sounding peevish, it was ‘probably the most grotesque reflection of the votes cast which any Parliamentary vote has ever shown’. Ramsay MacDonald went on: ‘there has been no Parliament elected in the lifetime of any of us the existence and work of which ought to be more firmly challenged’, by the extra-parliamentary, if necessary.³⁴

III

From the Public Gallery it was evident that there was more than just a matter of seating protocol with which to be contended: there was a new geography of politics. From the Press Gallery it was evident that the ‘Opposition front bench has almost completely disappeared’; ‘Two constitutional parties are virtually wiped out’, the *New Statesman* observed. ‘These results destroy the party system, turning the House of Commons into an annexe of Government’.³⁵ The latter found itself embarking ‘on the experiment of governing a country without an Opposition’.³⁶ Even the most supportive press admitted that ‘the size of the majority and the absence of any man of parliamentary standing to lead His Majesty’s Opposition are grave evils’.³⁷ Remarkably, with estimates varying between 250 to over 400 ‘no official or even semi-official pronouncement has been made as to what the majority really is’.³⁸

‘This congested House’ first met on 4 February.³⁹ Because of a London underground strike many Members were late arriving, and there were rumours of a power cut by strikers to prevent them meeting at all.⁴⁰ The chamber ‘was a seething mass of humanity’, *Punch*’s William Locker observed, ‘enough to swamp the floor and surge over into the galleries’ and so many Coalitionists that they had to ‘overflow’ to the opposition benches.⁴¹ Seating remained scarce, and its scarcity contentious. Those who were able to subside had then to survive a ventilation system ‘most members feel the effect of ... some to the extent that it shortens their parliamentary existence, voluntarily or not.’⁴² In the dark adjacent lobbies one new Member discerned ‘a steady stream of beggars, sightseers, would-be statesmen, people with grievances, inventors and others seeking relief and advice demand their member’s

services.’⁴³ Many attested that as ‘a workshop it is badly equipped; it is overcrowded, and it is unhealthy.’⁴⁴

It was a neophyte yet aged assemblage.⁴⁵ Seasoned by life though they may have been, in Parliament ‘the majority of the members [were] new and inexperienced, [and] such a one-sided House was not a good training for them. There was a tendency to disregard traditions and precedents’.⁴⁶ ‘It was not, as a rule, a well-attended House’, as was apparent from the Press Gallery. ‘An unusually small proportion of the new men, unskilled and unpractised, were desirous of Parliamentary distinction or interested in everyday work.’⁴⁷ Once questions were over, a ‘House of fifty or sixty is not noticeably thin’.⁴⁸ Some blamed the Members’ dramatically improved social and leisure facilities of bars, restaurants and games rooms.⁴⁹ Despite being salaried since 1911, Members without private means or an auxiliary profession found it hard to live on, and so after Labour Party representations, expenses were paid to cover transport between the Commons and their constituency. That provision corresponded with the stated intention of Labour members that they should be constituency representatives, with the Commons both their ‘dwelling place’ and ‘platform’.⁵⁰ Their request that salaries were paid from the date of the declaration of the poll rather than that of the oath being taken was however refused by a Speaker worried at a public ‘already rather restive at the payment of salaries’; only after the oath could the £150 deposit be reclaimed, and ‘in their zeal to be in a position to reimburse themselves Members crowded in such numbers to the tables that there was some danger that they would be overturned.’⁵¹

Those on whom the Act had the greatest impact played no part. The ingress of the forty per cent of men who had been unenfranchised was much more apparent than that of the 100 per cent of women who had been (those under the age of thirty remained voteless). Of 1,623 candidates in the election, seventeen were women; only one was elected, and she declined to take her seat. In the event that one might, there was the urgent provision of

‘lavatory accommodation’ – albeit for numbers unknown – and ‘Quarters for the Feminine Contingent’, with a refreshment room ‘decorated with portraits of famous men’.⁵² The Act notwithstanding, women still, as one authority ambiguously put it, ‘were incapable of being elected.’⁵³ The corrective Parliament (Qualification of Women) Bill, which would not long before have ‘been laughed out of the House’, in 1918 ‘was carried, after a couple of hours, by an overwhelming majority.’⁵⁴ Nevertheless, ‘[i]t took women quite a long time to get accustomed to politics and the atmosphere of Westminster’, and not a few men, some of whom were at least partly reconciled to the opposite sex by the sudden ease of locating a hat when raising a point of order.⁵⁵

When, in 1931, a cabinet minister at the dispatch box was asked a question about the removal of two trees in Green Park in consequence of a proposed widening of Piccadilly, followed by a question about the granting of a new constitution for Burma, it was clear to him at least that the Commons was swamped in more than one sense. Central to one post-war critique from the Webbs was ‘the submergence of the House of Commons in the flood of government activity’.⁵⁶ The cabinet minister in question concluded that the ‘consequence is that hardly any of the work is done properly.’⁵⁷ Government programmes in the 1918 Parliament were ‘uncomfortably full’.⁵⁸ That that Parliament, in addition to non-legislative business, placed an average of 79 Acts annually on the Statute Book – a considerable increase compared with the 1910 Parliament – was at least in part a reflection of the significant procedural changes effected within days of the session beginning. Though not dependent on the Act, they and their timing were products of the opportunity it provided. The Government continued the trend to take time for its business from that of Private Members. The system of Standing Committees was extended, relieving parliamentary business by sitting simultaneously with the House to consider bills as a matter of course. Changes to Standing Orders provided a

technical, strictly regulated, enhancement of the old system. By giving the Speaker power to select amendments for debate, the House accepted arrangements that would limit individual members' ability to delay or disrupt the passage of a bill by flooding the order paper with amendments.⁵⁹ Not long into the Parliament the Speaker was presented with a 'very real and present danger' requiring him 'to guard the rights and privileges of the Commons against the encroachment by the Executive Government.'⁶⁰ Lowther had been prevailed upon to preside over the first two years of the new parliament, and the Prime Minister wanted the Chairman of Ways and Means, J.H. Whitley, to succeed him.⁶¹ This apparent abuse of authority produced a row with accusations of gross violations of the ancient privileges of the Commons of which Private Members were the trustees.⁶² Such desecration notwithstanding, the Prime Minister's nominee prevailed. A member of the Cabinet inadvertently revealed Whitley's allure: 'A minister in charge of a difficult bill and fighting an uphill battle against the clock could wish for no better ally.'⁶³

The abiding antagonism between 'certainty of business' and 'liberty of discussion' for some had been settled. 'Parliament had little more to do than to ratify the decisions of the executive Government,' one Private Member felt, 'and Parliament could do little more than approve, or disapprove'.⁶⁴ A Cabinet minister confided 'legislation is being passed by a mere handful of Members'.⁶⁵ There were signs for many that the Act had produced effectively a dictatorship – the Labour leader called it 'Kaiserism'⁶⁶ – and that the Commons had become 'the charwoman of Whitehall'.⁶⁷ The position of Leader of the House became more important – to the scepticism of some – but with the immediate benefit of ministers more reliably circulating important papers to Private Members.⁶⁸ The Machinery of Government Committee recommended as a 'correlative an increase in the power of the Legislature as the check upon the acts and proposals of the Executive', whilst at the same time not 'disturbing the balance of authority'.⁶⁹ The sapping of initiative from the Commons – apart from debates

over amendments to the Address – was one reason why the executive conceded greater interrogative opportunities. The questioning of ministers constituted a ‘Grand Inquest of the Nation’ in which Labour Members’ ‘influence of questions on policy and administration’, a Clerk averred, was ‘considerable. They are very often the only means available of expressing the views of groups of members on the government.’⁷⁰ So determined was the Speaker to include as many as possible that to some the questioning of ministers had been reduced to ‘a trivial catechism’.⁷¹ Over 200 questions being asked in a day was not uncommon, a ‘growing plague’ which led to the eventual remedy of no more than four oral questions being allowed to be put down daily, freeing a minister from devoting ‘so much of his valuable time to satisfying Parliamentary curiosity’.⁷² Yet the ventilative functions of Parliament were the primary instruments of Private Members.⁷³ Private Members’ Bills offered the lowest prospect of return of all parliamentary investments, but Labour Members were adept in exploiting the ballot as such Bills were the principal way in which they could use their platform for the education of public opinion. Those who obtained the highest place had to introduce a bill to represent fundamental Party policy even if, therefore, there was no chance of it progressing. Friday, the only day when ministers were not expected to attend, effectively became the day for debates on Labour party projects or, ‘mere variations on hackneyed party themes’.⁷⁴

Procedure struck some ‘as being unduly cumbersome,’ not to say obsolete: ‘hours marching through the lobbies like sheep through a pen’.⁷⁵ Stricter whipping had ‘tended to turn the average back-bench member in to a voting machine’; when there was a division – the result of which was nearly always known beforehand – ‘the absent members pour in from the smoke-rooms and elsewhere, and march through the division lobbies’, three quarters of whom having ‘not heard a word of the debate’, or, if they were called, ‘find themselves on their feet without any remembrance of what their motions are.’⁷⁶ One new Member reflected

how ‘pride is chastened by disillusionment’;⁷⁷ another of how a Member was swiftly disabused ‘of the fancy that he influenced events.’⁷⁸ ‘Ridiculed and reviled’, Private Members ‘are deprived of the authority that they are elected to exercise.’⁷⁹ One said ‘I used to wonder how I ever got here, but now I cannot help wondering how on earth any of the others ever managed it.’⁸⁰ Outside diversions were essential: ‘Complete devotion to the pursuit of political life may lead to swifter advancement, but seems inevitably to bring with it a loss of sense of proportion’.⁸¹ Inside, more than one felt that initiative and independence of thought were discouraged.⁸² Outside, local associations distributed candidate ‘questionnaires’ requesting return with detailed replies.⁸³ One Member knew colleagues ‘who bitterly regretted’ giving ‘some written pledge or promise which they found it difficult or objectionable to have to comply with’; another always refused. ‘I cannot help feeling that every Member of the House would be happier in his mind if he could go back to Westminster on that explicit understanding’.⁸⁴ It was the antithesis of direct action.

IV

One of the many the Act generated was ‘an experiment in politics without party’.⁸⁵ In its absence could be heard what the Leader of the House called the ‘clatter outside, which is reflected so much in some of the new speeches to which we have listened’, of the press.⁸⁶ It was a clamour to which some suspected the Prime Minister listened more attentively than he did to that of Members. It evinced a sense that journalists effectively had supplanted Members; indeed, Austen Chamberlain’s ‘corporate feeling of the House’ was felt most when the press sought to bully.⁸⁷ Some saw virtue in the lack of parliamentary opposition, others that after years of coalition, government by party was overdue, not least as the present government majority was overlarge.⁸⁸ There were so many Coalitionists it was even unclear

where they would sit. Since separation on party lines may 'create an atmosphere of opposition' the Unionist Chief Whip told the Speaker; "it would be wiser for all sections of Coalitionists to be mixed up."⁸⁹ With such a large majority, discipline was lax, government backbenchers rebelling sometimes with immunity and for their own amusement.⁹⁰ It was a problem for the Speaker. Not only were there parties both inside and outside of the government, there were 'a number of groups, Unionists, Liberals, Labour, Nationalists, Sinn Feiners, Cooperators etc who may or may not act together, or who may act together on some subjects and not on others', the Speaker told one Member. 'Events alone and not I can determine which of these groups or what combination of groups will eventually become the regular opposition or whether there will be a regular opposition.'⁹¹ From the aspect of the First Commissioner of Works, who had physically to accommodate them, 'it seems in the future we shall have more of the group system, rather than the two Party system of the past.'⁹²

Arithmetic alone meant that 'the Coalition can safely ignore what such a tatterdemalion Opposition chooses to say or do.'⁹³ With the non-return of Asquith and Arthur Henderson, there was no obvious leader of it, and the two largest opposition parties in the Commons were divided as to which should be the official Opposition. Aware that by-election results might lead to a weekly census, Lowther felt his responsibility extended to whom to call first. As it was, business was slowed – and Locker inspired – by the Liberal and Labour leaders as 'each of them thinks it necessary to speak whenever the other does, like the hungry lions on Afric's burning shore'.⁹⁴ The Speaker alternated the roars; attempts similarly to divide the opposition whip rooms were abandoned ('The narrow passage leading down to them make it impossible to divide them between 2 without great inconvenience and probably friction.'⁹⁵) The leaders of the groups could sit on the opposition front bench as well as members of the previous administration. The Speaker said 'there would be no official

opposition and no person who could claim (or whose claim would be admitted) to be leader of His Majesty's Opposition.'⁹⁶

Donald Maclean led the opposition Liberal Party contingent, which although few thought 'that they were the real "Simon Pure"', with great historical traditions which should not be lightly set aside by reason of a passing failure at the polls'.⁹⁷ Maclean's colleague Sir Thomas Whittaker maintained that the Speaker should regard all Liberals as of one party, and thus 'the only possible alternatives to this government would be a Unionist or a Liberal Government,' indeed, the Chairman of the Committee on Parliamentary Procedure went on, 'it would appear to be unnecessary and undesirable to depose a great historic party from that position simply because ... [it] is not quite homogenous in regard to its leadership'.⁹⁸

Outnumbered they may have been by the coalition, but Labour still outnumbered the 'Wee Free' Liberals. The alternative leader of the opposition was thus William Adamson, to some ears the personification of the Parliamentary Labour Party. 'Speech seems hard for him and thought harder still', the Leader of the House told the King; of Adamson's colleagues 'the average mentality is slow and lacks understanding of even comparatively simple propositions and except for the annoyance which obstinacy always causes my personal feeling is that they will not be a very formidable opposition'.⁹⁹ Speaker Lowther found the Labour men 'slack in attendance and ineffective in discussing details'.¹⁰⁰ Inside the party, concerns were raised about 'the poor attendance of Members on the Benches and the necessity for better organisation' as well as for individual initiative.¹⁰¹ From outside the Commons, through a passing failure at the polls of his own, MacDonald complained that too many Labour men 'are not really interested in Parliamentary work, and are not being taught to be interested.'¹⁰² A good parliamentary team increasingly being seen as essential, the Organisation Committee stepped in to support Adamson's scratch efforts. 'Two clerks, three typists – we cannot do with less', were requested, plus one of the Liberals' three messengers 'to fetch members to

important divisions'.¹⁰³ And the National Executive Committee instructed the Parliamentary Party to 'make the necessary arrangements to become the Official Opposition.'¹⁰⁴ Thus did Adamson assert himself, asking the Speaker before Parliament met to 'make whatever arrangements are necessary for the Party to assume the responsibilities of the Official Opposition.' 'There is no immediate hurry, of course', Adamson assured him, 'but tomorrow would suit us'.¹⁰⁵

'Tranquillity' was the Conservative slogan in the subsequent general election, in November 1922. Tranquillity triumphed. Yet it was 'always inevitable that, if an adequate constitutional outlet were denied, the demand for drastic changes in the economic system would take shape in the industrial field'.¹⁰⁶ In 1922, the coming party arrived. More numerous and numinous, the Labour benches 'have been filled, whilst other benches have been scantily occupied, the work of the Whips has been reorganised, and in division after division we have been able to account for every man ... The Labour Party has revived the life of Parliament.'¹⁰⁷ But then '[f]lushed with triumph ... they were speedily disillusioned.'¹⁰⁸ Impatience defined the attitude of many Labour members to parliamentary procedure. Edward Fellowes, Assistant Clerk, felt 'they regarded the rules of debate in the Commons as having been framed solely to prevent their freedom of expression'.¹⁰⁹ Speaker Whitley decided to drive those elected in 1922 'with a loose rein' and for that purpose felt it politic to break on occasion with custom.¹¹⁰ Whitley's secretary felt that 'he was out to help them to take their position as His Majesty's Opposition', the Rules of Order and recognized Procedures permitting.¹¹¹ It appeared to others that for the Red Clydesiders, 'Mr Speaker was only a Lord Mayor'.¹¹² The reception that the new Labour members, few of whom had much formal education or training, received was, for one of them, 'contemptuous indifference strongly tempered with fear'.¹¹³ The roots showed. Fellowes recognised that their 'experience was largely confined to the platform, where interruptions could be dealt with in language

which was disorderly in the Commons.¹¹⁴ For the Speakers, tranquillity came to be a reminiscence. When their time came, both were happy to retire.¹¹⁵

V

That the 1918 House of Commons was heralded was partly why it disappointed. One newspaper recalled ‘the common cant of the election period. There was to be a "new world", and the House of Commons, elected on an extended franchise, was to be representative of aspirations and ideals of which the country had become actively conscious during its passage.’¹¹⁶ That the Act produced a ‘complete travesty in the House of Commons of the verdict of the country’ proved to Asquith, among others, that ‘a not very legitimate use was made of it.’¹¹⁷ An Act which settled electoral arrangements for the rest of the century had been followed by an election on a system that all had condemned. Its very unrepresentativeness meant that the government’s victory lacked moral authority; worse, was ‘destructive of the representative character of Parliament.’¹¹⁸ Electoral reformers were emboldened.¹¹⁹ Some commentators felt that the Act meant that the Commons ‘no longer performs some of the functions attributed to it by Bagehot and is not indispensable to the performance of any of them’.¹²⁰ It was incompetent in controlling the executive, had no point of view to oppose that of the government, and was ignorant of the principles of parliamentary government. Inasmuch as Members reflected anything, they reflected ‘interests’. ‘Women produce life, and men produce property,’ Walter Elliott mused, ‘and this is the reason of their respective bias, each stressing the value of the effort which they can realise’; by enfranchising women the Act ‘very greatly emphasised the position of the Commons as a Consumers’ Council’.¹²¹ More than after other such Acts, Members ‘had to find means of satisfying the whole adult population, many of whom had neither the capacity nor the interest

to assess serious arguments.’¹²² What took place inside the chamber should not be separated from how it was considered outside: the specific – its conventions – and the general, ‘its special business as a representative Assembly is to explore the causes of discontent, to hear and redress grievances, to anticipate and prevent disturbances of the peace’.¹²³ It was clear to some that the ‘fair hopes of the fathers of modern democracy have not been fully realized. Universal suffrage has not proved to be a universal panacea’.¹²⁴ Coming at the conclusion of the war to end all wars, that may have been fitting.

Governing had to be adapted to the new conditions. ‘The old oligarchic methods will not do’, as a Viscount told a Cabinet Secretary.¹²⁵ The majority undeservedly conferred on the Government threatened the role of the Commons. ‘What the House thinks or feels is no longer a question of importance with the government or anyone else’, said the *New Statesman*. ‘The supremacy of the Executive was complete.’¹²⁶ However propitious some Tories may have found democracy to be, others felt that representative government, independent and critical thinking, and quality of debate had become neglected, and that Parliament must revive to defeat non-democratic ideas, such as direct action.¹²⁷ For the Liberal Ivor Davies, too many Members ‘since 1918 have been shamefully reluctant to act according to their consciences’ for fear of ‘a candidate who could be relied upon by their Party to toe the line.’¹²⁸ With payment, perquisites, and presumption on the part of the public, came a class of professional politicians. It was this conception not Government which subdued Parliament – the Prime Minister’s threat of dissolution, which was simultaneously an appeal to the people and a threat to legislators – ‘but the Chief Whip, with his ultimate verdict as to the re-election of all’.¹²⁹ One effect was to strengthen the party machine, not only over constituents, but also over Members, who owed their election to it; a new oligarchic method.

More than being a place merely to raise issues, the House was vaunted as a place to do things, but the very purpose of the coming party was in danger of suffocation from the parliamentary embrace. For some Labour Members their elevation was consummation. 'This was the House of Commons!' one remembered exclaiming; 'I was convinced that the workers were right in shaping their course to capture this citadel'.¹³⁰ Citadel, dwelling place, or platform, 'Socialists', MacDonald pronounced, 'should consider how to perfect the system'.¹³¹ Their enemy agreed.¹³² The complaint, as expressed by Austen Chamberlain, was that 'a great loquaciousness has seized upon the House', thereby providing a measure against which to disparage the unpractised Labour men.¹³³ The Act had the effect of emphasising that the person chosen by Labour MPs to be parliamentary leader was effectively the party leader; in 1921, Adamson was replaced.¹³⁴ In 1922, the Clydesiders 'came to Westminster with a reputation as revolutionaries', as Ellen Wilkinson recalled, 'and the House of Commons, which was only used to the solid trade union official type of Labour member, was thrilled to find that they really looked the part'.¹³⁵ With MacDonald as leader, they finally sounded it. Yet he appealed to his colleagues 'for a greater measure of self-restraint and for a realisation of the fact that when a Labour government arrives it will be greatly hampered if, in the meantime, Parliamentary Government has been destroyed'.¹³⁶ It was the case that '[i]f the Party fails in Parliament, it fails in the country, and the dream of a Labour government will vanish for a generation'.¹³⁷ So it was that 'as the years went by they steadily became more and more rigid upholders of the traditions of the house'. as keen to stress that in 'defending Parliamentary method and Parliament, one must be careful not to be committed to defend Parliament in its existing form,' but nor should anything be done to weaken the power of Labour for when it did win a majority.¹³⁸ The House of Lords excepted, on parliamentary reform the party's 1918 constitution was silent given that its 'repeated demands largely [had been] conceded' by the Act.¹³⁹ In consequence of the concerns that the Commons was

becoming overwhelmed with reconstructing a nation and running an empire, some advocated geographical, if not functional, devolution, and Members agreed to 'the creation of subordinate Legislatures within the United Kingdom'.¹⁴⁰ Speaker Lowther chaired another inquiry, into devolution. His earlier jigsaw puzzle had rationalised the conception of the electorate: all were free and equal, 'but interchangeable. No account is taken of the difference in function of the voters, which the early constituencies at least tried to respect.' In the interests of rationalising and equalising, a fishing or agricultural constituency brought up to the average of constituents 'is nowadays loaded with any block of population, mining, urban-dormitory, what you will.' For Walter Elliot, 'This is a very new development.'¹⁴¹ Rational it may not have been, but at least with the old Boroughs there was a rationale.

'It is the fashion to decry the Parliament of 1918'.¹⁴² Illegitimate issue of a cynical and peremptory consummation that was the 'Coupon Election'; for Asquith, it was 'from first to last an artificial business.'¹⁴³ Such an election, at least, would not happen again: in 1945 the dislocation may have been greater but the polity more settled. Moreover, in the testimony of one who witnessed both, the quality of the later intake was much more practised.¹⁴⁴ By then, the Act had contributed to the greater nationalisation of voting in terms of class, politics, and religion; by compounding fishwives and farmers. Changes to constituency boundaries in 1918 were considerable, but a similar number of Members was returned so the matter was of party more than parliamentary, significance. The story of franchise extension meant that just as the determinant of the government passed from the Commons to the country, legislative dominance passed from Commons to Cabinet, and, once electoral reform had been dropped, party triumphed. As one of those moved to take stock then acknowledged, 'to oppose the Party System in this Year of Grace, 1919, is a work of supererogation'.¹⁴⁵

Party government undermined parliamentary government; alongside the anomalous election outcome, the authority of the Commons was undermined, as if political principle had been by partisan chicanery. The 1918 election had inevitably disordered the two-party system. Only in 1924 was that system restored, albeit with a different two parties. Three general elections in three years between 1922 and 1924 gave scope to consider electoral reform, but there was little appetite outside Westminster and the commentariat. The system remained stable, and direct action and syndicalism were marginalised. The new prominence of party leaders served to reinforce the notion that, as the Chamber was directed by the executive, Members followed their leader more than they did their judgement. The Commons appeared merely as a legislature, rather than as the authority which could determine the existence of the executive. So far as women and redistribution were concerned, the war impeded but also impelled, rather as the great decline in the influence of the Commons detected by the Burke scholar Frank Rafferty was ‘by no means due to the War’; it ‘has almost meant an eclipse.’¹⁴⁶ The war suspended its power to determine, and the decline in its prestige followed.¹⁴⁷

The aftermath of Armageddon was conducive to great hyperbole as it was to sheer confusion. Much was said to be ‘on trial’ – parliamentary institutions in general, and the House of Commons in particular: ‘[i]t is not too much to say that the constitutional method is upon its last trial – and the sands are running out.’¹⁴⁸ Single member plurality voting had survived and was unthreatened thereafter; female suffrage, PR, and Lords reform remained unresolved. Questions as to whether individual opinion had been transmitted into public action, or whether a system that was too centralised had been rectified continued, unanswered. The appeal of decentralisation, devolution and direct action was evident to some; to others, Parliament should be such voice as the nation possessed. That was why, as important as it was that the franchise had been extended and that redistribution had taken

place, the election which followed undermined much of the sense that good had been done. Such counsels were of perfection. It neither violated tradition nor broke from precedent that the House of Commons should not be representative of the people, but it had been subject to an act of reform nonetheless.

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